

Mirror, Mirror: A Look at Self-Esteem & Disney Princesses

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah E. Haley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping "S" at the beginning and a long, trailing "y" at the end.

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Abstract

Almost every child in the world has heard of Disney or seen at least one film. Even though many children love these movies, they can send very dangerous messages to children that have detrimental effects. Disney princesses are shown as being skinny and beautiful and always get their Prince Charming, however, this is unrealistic for many children. By promoting these princesses as role models, Disney is damaging young children's self-esteem. By examining *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1947), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Tangled* (2010), as well as other research, I will make a case that Disney's princesses affect children's self-esteem in a negative way.

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“Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” This quote has been heard millions of times around the world by children and adults, alike, in Walt Disney’s animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The evil queen asks her magic mirror that exact same question every day, hoping to hear that she is the most fair of all. This subliminal message, that it is important to be beautiful and ‘fair,’ is being taught to children at a young age. But what happens when this message has a negative impact on a child? What happens when that child becomes so obsessed with how she looks that she believes she will never be good enough? This paper will explain the impact Disney, particularly the princesses, has on children’s self-esteem. By examining Disney films as well as articles and research on the subject, this paper will prove that Disney princesses have a negative effect on children’s self-esteem.

The very first Disney princess introduced was Snow White, in 1937. Snow White is said to be the “fairest of all,” with lips red as a rose, skin pale as snow, and hair that is as dark as ebony. When compared to some of the newer princesses, Snow White has shorter hair and a wider face. The animators wanted to make her look more like a child because in the story, Snow White is only 14 years old. This is evident in the bow she wears in her hair as well as on her shoes and the fact that of all the Disney princesses, Snow White is the shortest. (see Appendix)

The main theme of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is beauty. The evil queen sets out to have Snow White killed because of her looks. The queen is no longer the most beautiful so she decides to get rid of the competition. Meanwhile,

Snow White is dressed in rags, cleaning outside when a handsome prince sees her and instantly falls in love with her. This idea of 'love at first sight' continues to be a main part of Disney movies today. "Images of love at first sight in the films encourage the belief that physical appearance is the most important thing," (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003).

Once Snow White is with the dwarfs, she offers to become the typical housewife by cooking and cleaning for them. This was very representative of the time period the movie was made in. Women were domesticated and would stay home with the children, cooking and cleaning. She is shown as "the submissive Snow White of 1935 who concerns herself with domestic duties and later waits passively to be rescued," (Dundes, 2001). The message this sends to young girls nowadays is that they need a man to come in and save them. This movie does not teach young girls to be strong and independent, but to depend on a man because they are not capable of depending on themselves. "Snow White...has merely to wait prettily, because someday her prince will come," (Inge, 2004). Even the dwarfs, often seen as the comedic relief, are more capable of defending themselves and being part of the action. While this movie does not reflect the current society's view on feminism, "it accurately reflected the general public attitude toward the place of women in society and continued a long tradition in Western culture of portraying women as passive vessels of innocence and virtue," (Inge, 2004).

Another part of the film that becomes a problem is the Queen's mirror. While the Queen asks the mirror every day if she is the fairest of them all, "the

mirror is given a masculine personality as a commentator on the status of her beauty,” (Inge, 2004). By personifying the mirror as a male, Disney is giving the power to males to decide on if a woman is beautiful or not while also dictating, subliminally, that they need to be perceived as beautiful by a man or they are not worthy. The Queen does not think that she is less beautiful but because a male told her she was not beautiful, she believed him and did not stop to think if she thought she was beautiful.

When *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was rereleased in 1993, journalist Jami Bernard (1993) stated that the film had returned “just in time to mess up a new generation of little girls,” (p. H3). The idea that Snow White can sit around and wait for her prince to come “sets up little girls for a lifetime of feverish romantic expectations that don’t easily mix with the jungle out there that is the modern dating scene,” (Inge, 2004). While it is true that most girls who watch Disney movies are not old enough to date, they may have the preconceived notion that it will be easy to find a prince, leading them into questionable situations.

The next princess movie was *Cinderella*, which was made in 1950. The premise of this movie is that Cinderella’s stepmother treats her like a servant because she does not like Cinderella. Meanwhile, her two daughters treat Cinderella horribly, demanding she do practically everything for them; however, no matter how awful they are to Cinderella, she always remains obedient. Cinderella is portrayed as being beautiful on the outside as well as the inside whereas her two stepsisters are shown as being ugly on the inside and outside.

Cinderella is described as the “quintessential ‘perfect girl,’ always gentle, kind, and lovely,” (Henke, Umble, & Smith, 1996). Cinderella is the first princess to have blonde hair and blue eyes. She is portrayed as being tall and thin. Another trademark is feet. This is evident in the fact that no one else could fit their feet into her glass slipper, especially her stepsisters who both have very big feet. Cinderella is often called “the blonde with the tiny feet,” (Lester, 2010). (see Appendix)

The climax of the film comes when all the ladies of the town are invited to a party at the palace and Cinderella believes that she might go. Instead, the two stepsisters destroy the dress Cinderella and her friends made and go to the ball, leaving Cinderella crying. Cinderella’s fairy godmother shows up to give Cinderella a beautiful dress and transportation to the ball. Cinderella arrives and the prince is instantly enthralled with her because of her beauty. Cinderella only has until midnight to be at the ball before all of her gifts go away. Cinderella leaves with the clock striking twelve and even loses one of her slippers. The prince, in love with this dream girl, needs to find her, so he takes the shoe door-to-door in the hopes of finding her. He finally comes to Cinderella’s house and the shoe fits. The movie ends with Cinderella and the prince getting married and living happily ever after in the palace, away from her stepmother and stepsisters.

It is inferred in the film that the only reason the prince falls in love with Cinderella initially is because she is the most beautiful girl at the party. Like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the audience sees the idea of ‘love at first sight.’ The heroes and heroines don’t really talk and are not given a chance to talk until

the end of the movie. The prince doesn't even know Cinderella's name but he knows that he loves her. Cinderella is portrayed as being kind and sweet and these are the reasons her stepmother dislikes her. Although the audience gets to see this, through her interactions with her animal friends, the prince simply sees her as a beautiful girl.

The next princess is Princess Aurora, from *Sleeping Beauty*, made in 1959. When Aurora is born, she is given 3 gifts by 3 good fairies. The first gift given is the gift of beauty, followed by the gift of song. Before the 3rd gift is given, Maleficent, the villain, appears and places a curse on Aurora. The curse is that, on Aurora's 16th birthday, she would prick her finger on a spinning wheel and die. Maleficent leaves and the third fairy gives Aurora the gift that even if Aurora pricks her finger, she will not die, but go to sleep until true love's kiss breaks the spell. In order to escape this curse, the 3 fairies take her away into the woods and raise her for 16 years. This is interesting because the three fairies keep Aurora hidden in the forest, ensuring she never meets anyone. They even give her a new name: Rose. By having Aurora in the woods for 16 years and not allowed to meet anyone, Disney is almost forcing love at first sight because how else is Aurora supposed to meet or fall in love with anyone if she is alone with 3 fairies?

On the day of her 16th birthday, she goes out into the woods and meets Prince Philip, although she does not know who he is at the time. She is singing and the Prince hears her so he goes to find where the voice is coming from. Once he sees her, he goes over to her and with a little persuasion they start

dancing. Afterwards, she runs away saying she will meet him later that night, even after being warned to not talk to strangers. However, Aurora is taken to the castle and falls victim to the curse and goes into a deep sleep.

The movie ends with Prince Philip waking Aurora up with a kiss and they live happily ever after. While it is implied that Philip and Aurora have slightly more time to get to know each other, it is not known for sure. After they dance in the woods, they are seen cuddling. When Prince Philip asks her for her name, she runs away. The audience is never told how long they were there because the audience was watching a scene with the two kings at the castle. Again, the idea of 'love at first sight' is a key component to the story.

Aurora is shown to be very tall and slender, with long blonde hair. In the movie, Aurora is said to be 16 years old. Aurora's willowy shape was inspired by Audrey Hepburn, who was a major actress at the time, however, Audrey Hepburn was 30-years-old when the film came out. By making Aurora resemble Audrey Hepburn, they made a 16-year-old girl have the shape of a 30-year-old. This gives young girls an unrealistic idea of what a 16-year-old should look like as well as sound like. The voice used for Aurora does not sound 16-years-old. In fact, the actress that plays Aurora was 29 years old at the time. (see Appendix)

Aurora is perhaps one of the most passive of the princesses. "Like Cinderella, Aurora is obedient, beautiful, acquiescent to authority, and essentially powerless in matters regarding her own fate," (Henke et al., 1996). Aurora has no real part in the action of the story. The only thing she manages to do is touch the

spindle, causing her to fall asleep and then Aurora “sleeps through most of the film while others battle to decide her future,” (Henke et al., 1996).

In 1989, after a 30-year gap, Disney finally came out with another princess movie. *The Little Mermaid* is about a 16-year-old mermaid princess named Ariel, who is tired of living in the sea and dreams of being on land and having legs. Ariel likes to collect “treasures,” or human items found from old ships. One day, she sees a ship with a bunch of men on it. She is curious and swims up to the boat instantly seeing Eric. Suddenly, a storm begins and Eric ends up almost drowning. Ariel saves him and begins singing to him. Eric begins to wake up and Ariel has to swim away. Ariel is now in love and will do anything to win Eric’s heart, even going to the sea witch Ursula and trading her voice for legs. Ariel is given three days in which she must get a kiss from Eric in order to keep her legs. What is interesting is that Ariel sacrifices her voice for legs but is only guaranteed legs for three days, not forever.

At first, Ariel is hesitant because she is curious how she will be able to tell Eric she saved him without her voice. Ursula insists that guys don’t like to listen to girls and that the only language she needs is ‘body language.’ Eric finds Ariel and the two begin to spend time together, falling in love. However, Ursula does not want Ariel to get a kiss from Eric and transforms herself into a beautiful girl, using Ariel’s voice to hypnotize Eric into marrying her. At the end of the movie, Ursula is killed and Eric and Ariel get married. The movie infers that the only reason Eric falls in love with Ariel is because of her looks and voice.

While this movie does a lot better having the characters get to know each other before being in love, the message that it sends to girls is that in order to get the guy, you have to give up what is most important to you. Ariel does this; she gets rid of her voice and gives up being with her family and friends to be with Eric. "Ariel gives up her voice to be with the prince, turning her body into his reward," (Breaux, 2010). Being able to articulate what you want is an important part of forming your identity. "Little wonder, then, that alarms sound for feminists concerned with the psychological development of girls and women's sense of self when Ariel literally sacrifices her voice and mermaid body to win Eric's love. What is gained by females who silence themselves in a masculinist society," (Henke et al., 1996)?

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel "was modeled after a slightly anorexic Barbie doll with thin waist and prominent bust thus portraying a dangerous model for young women," (Zarranz, 2007). By portraying a princess as being unnaturally thin with big breasts, this gives young girls an idea of what they think they should look like. This could lead to many young girls developing eating disorders or even having plastic surgery to try to fit the ideal of feminine beauty. (see Appendix)

The next princess movie, and perhaps one of the most popular Disney films, is *Beauty and the Beast*, made in 1991. The princess, Belle, is a strong and independent female. Belle is kind, caring, and book smart. Belle is very interested in learning and loves to read. When Belle's father gets lost, she goes to find him. When she finds him, she has to trade places with him as a prisoner of a prince who has been turned into a beast because he was not a good person. In

the prologue, it is explained that the Beast was very selfish and rejected beauty and was cursed by an enchantress as being just as ugly on the outside as he was on the inside.

Over the course of the movie, Belle endures verbal abuse from the Beast and ultimately ends up falling in love with him. While this film does send a good message to girls, that love is not based on looks, it also sends a very negative message. Belle ends up falling in love with the Beast, but at what cost?

The Beast is verbally abusive to Belle yet she does not try to leave. Instead, Belle tries “to find the Beast’s humanity despite his emotional and verbal abuse [which] subliminally reaches young girls to accept abusive treatment to gain a boy’s approval,” (Breux, 2010). Or, in Belle’s case, to gain his love. This promotes abusive relationships, which continue to be a growing problem for many women. This also goes to show that no matter how smart or strong a woman is, she is still a “prisoner” to a man. However, Belle is able to resist the pursuit of Gaston, the overly macho villain, whose only interest is “winning” Belle as a wife, while all of the other girls constantly swoon and try to garner his attention and affections. Gaston does not love Belle but simply wants her as his trophy wife because he deems her to be the most beautiful girl in the town.

The character of Belle was also modeled after Sherri Stoner, a classical dancer. “Stoner’s small frame (5’2”, 95 pounds) is reflected in the physique of the active, yet delicate young women in the plotlines of *The Little Mermaid* and *The Beauty and the Beast*,” (Lacroix, 2004). Ariel and Belle, along with Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are all “weaker, more pristine, and largely incapable of

action,” (Lacroix, 2004), whereas the later princesses are all a bit more spunky. (see Appendix)

The next princess is Jasmine. What is interesting about Jasmine is that she is not the main character of the movie she is in. *Aladdin*, made in 1992, is about a man of that name who is very poor. He finds a magic lamp and tries to win the affection of our heroine, Jasmine. Jasmine is a princess and has to find a suitor because she is at the age to be married. Jasmine is the typical princess: she tries to help but rarely succeeds, she's beautiful, and she's a damsel in distress.

The only redeeming quality Jasmine has to make her not the typical Disney princess is that she doesn't just want to get married. It is her royal duty to get married but that's not what is important to her. Jasmine wants to be free to live her life how she wishes; however, since she is being forced to get married, she is determined to find love. This gives her a strong will to not settle for someone that is not of good character. She falls in love with Aladdin for who he is, not because he has money or is attractive. In fact, Aladdin does not have money. He is considered a “street rat” because he is so poor. Aladdin is the first male character to win the love of a princess and not also have a title to go behind his name.

Jasmine is a Middle Eastern princess. She is darker-skinned than any of the previous princesses; however, she still has many Anglo-Saxon attributes, “such as a delicate nose and small mouth,” (Lacroix, 2004). Jasmine is also just as small waisted as previous princesses. She does retain at least one feature

other than her darker skin tone that indicates her ethnicity; her “overly large almond shaped eyes,” (Lacroix, 2004). Jasmine’s dress is also very sexualized. While Jasmine is only 16-years-old, “the harem-esque look of her off the shoulder, cut-at-the-midriff blouse,” (Lacroix, 2004), calls to attention her physical assets more so than any 16-year-old girl’s outfit ever should. This just gives girls the impression that it is okay to dress provocatively even when they are that young. Even the Jasmine costumes that children wear for Halloween leave a bare midriff or at least have a flesh-colored fabric to imply that it is bare. (see Appendix)

Pocahontas is a movie made in 1995 about a Native American princess named Pocahontas. Pocahontas is a free spirit and is very in tune with nature. She is not like the rest of her tribe. The rest of her tribe holds this deep-seated hate for those who are not like them. When Pocahontas meets John Smith, she is afraid at first but is very curious as well. Pocahontas tries to learn as much as she can from John Smith and even tries to help stop the war that has been growing between her people and the Englishmen.

Pocahontas may be one of the strongest female characters because at the end of the movie, she stands up for love and her beliefs and stops the war before it even begins. Also, while she may be in love with John Smith, she does not leave with him to go back to England because she knows that she will be of more help to her people. One of the songs from the movie, “Colors of the Wind,” proves that Pocahontas is very caring. She talks about nature and how we should value it and treat it well.

“The pattern of the small, delicate frame ends with *Aladdin*,” (Lacroix, 2004). Pocahontas is anything but delicate. While she is strong and independent in personality, so is she in body. “One of the most talked about elements of this characterization was a physique that reflected a body structure comparable to that of a Barbie Doll, or supermodel, that seemed wholly inconsistent with the 12-year-old girl of historical fact,” (Lacroix, 2004). Again, Pocahontas also has the large almond shaped eyes that Jasmine had but the most compelling feature of Pocahontas is her body. “She is tall, has long, strong legs, and a developed bust. She retains, however, the slender waist like the others, which adds to the overall mature and voluptuous look of the character,” (Lacroix, 2004). The problem with this is that Pocahontas does not look a girl but a woman, a dangerous message to young girls. (see Appendix)

Another strong female Disney princess is Mulan. *Mulan* was made in 1998 about a young Chinese woman who impersonates a soldier to save her father, an injured war veteran, from having to go back to war. At the beginning of the movie, Mulan is being prepared to see the Matchmaker so that she may be paired with a future husband. Through a series of events while at the Matchmaker's, Mulan is told that while she is beautiful, she will never bring her family honor. Mulan then goes to war and after a rough patch at the beginning, soon begins to shine as a soldier. Mulan is found out and is almost killed but because she helped save her commanding officer's life, he spares her. Mulan then discovers that the enemy is planning on attacking the Emperor. She heads to the palace and ends up defeating the main villain of the story. The Emperor very publicly hails her as

their savior and gives her gifts to present to her family. When she returns home, she and her father reconcile and her commanding officer, who has fallen in love with Mulan, comes over for dinner.

While Mulan is a strong female heroine, she “has to become a man rather than exist as a strong woman [in the movie] and when she is a woman is subjected to Grandmother Fa’s constant encouragement to get a man,” (Breaux, 2010). The audience is left wondering what will happen to her at the end of the movie. Yes, she saved China but what next? Will she take Grandmother Fa’s advice and get a husband? Will she be given some position in the army because of what she already did?

One of the most important songs in the movie is the matchmaking song. The song is playing while Mulan gets ready to see the Matchmaker. The song insists that the only way for a female to bring honor to her family is by being matched to a husband. While this is set in a culture completely different from the United States, that is still a strong message to young girls. Another important song is “Reflection.” Mulan sings about how, when dressed as a bride, she cannot recognize herself. More than anything, she just wants to be herself but realizes if she were, she would never bring her family honor. (see Appendix)

After almost a ten-year gap, in 2009, Disney came out with a new Disney princess movie, *The Princess and the Frog*. This was an important milestone because this movie introduced the first African American princess, Tiana. Tiana is shown to be a hard worker. She has big dreams of owning her own restaurant and will do whatever she has to do to make her dreams a reality. Tiana meets

the prince, Naveen who has been transformed into a frog. In exchange for her help, Naveen agrees to give her enough money to buy her restaurant. Through the movie, Tiana helps Naveen become less irresponsible and selfish. At the end of the movie, Tiana and Naveen get married and open a restaurant.

Tiana is “young, thin, brown-skinned, and with straightened hair in ‘an elegant upsweep,’” (Lester, 2010). Many have condemned the way Tiana looks, particularly her hair. There has been controversy on why Disney could not have portrayed her having cornrows, dreadlocks, or even an Afro; all of these are more appropriate and culturally accepted hairstyles for African Americans. Disney has made claims that they are not racist and that they have Disney princesses that are culturally diverse. While they might have some princesses that come from different countries, Disney has chosen to Americanize these princesses by attributing them many Anglo-Saxon features that are not faithful to their own culture. (see Appendix)

While Tiana is a hard worker and very strong character, she is portrayed as the typical African American woman that loves to cook. Near the beginning, Tiana has enough money to get her restaurant but is told by the Fenner Brothers that she will not be able to buy it because of her “station” in life, and someone else ends up buying it. While Disney took a giant leap and finally made an African American princess, they did nothing to dispel certain stereotypes that many people have. “In Tiana, Disney also created a character that has very little interest in waiting for her prince to come,” (Breaux, 2010). While this is true, it can also be said that, non-the-less he does show up and she, as the typical

princess, can't help but be swept off her feet by him. "In the end, Tiana proves to be strong and independent, but ironically, her strength and independence are not complete without a man, for in the end, she marries Prince Naveen and opens her restaurant...because Naveen, along with Louis the alligator, persuade the Fenner Brothers to finally sell the mill to Tiana," (Breaux, 2010). Also, while talking to Mama Odie, the voodoo woman of New Orleans, Tiana is persuaded that while she may want to own a restaurant, it is not what she needs; instead, she needs love, in the form of Prince Naveen. This sends the message that Tiana should not continue to dream and instead should just settle down with a man. Tiana works hard and dreams big but at the end of the day, she needs a man.

An important and disturbing scene focuses not on Tiana, but on Charlotte, Tiana's best friend, whose only wish is to marry a prince and become a princess. Charlotte is getting ready for a ball when, "she humorously over-applies her makeup and adjusts her ball gown to emphasize her cleavage," (Breaux, 2010). While Charlotte is not the heroine of the story, she still is capable of sending serious messages to young girls about what it takes to live happily ever after with a prince.

The final Disney princess, Rapunzel, is from the film *Tangled*, made in 2010. Rapunzel is a princess with magic hair. The villain, Mother Gothel, kidnaps her from her parents, the King and Queen, and pretends to be her mother in order to use Rapunzel's hair for herself. Rapunzel is not allowed to go outside and the only thing she wants is to go outside and see "the lights." These lights

are really the floating lanterns that the King and Queen light every year for Rapunzel's birthday. Flynn Rider is a thief who happens to come across the tower in which Rapunzel lives. They set off together to see the lanterns. On the way, Rapunzel helps Flynn become a better person, and they fall in love. Mother Gothel stabs Flynn Rider when he tries to save Rapunzel. Even after Rapunzel has decided to sacrifice her freedom to save Flynn, in the end, Flynn saves Rapunzel from a life of servitude with Mother Gothel by cutting off her hair and essentially destroying Mother Gothel. Rapunzel is a very strong female character. She is kind, adventurous, creative, and caring. However, Disney stuck to the typical princess formula: skinny, big and beautiful eyes, and long, flowing hair. (see Appendix)

While Disney may have made some advancements in the character department, however, the look of a princess has been virtually unchanged. "Characterizations of Disney heroines remain one-dimensional and stereotypical, 'arranged according to a credo of domestication of the imagination,'" (Henke et al., 1996). The problem with this is that not everyone can look like these princesses. They all have ridiculously small waists. Most of these princesses are in their teens and look like they have the bodies of older women. For example, Ariel is one of the youngest princesses yet, at 16, she appears like she should be much older.

The truth is, not everyone can look like a Disney princess and Prince Charmings do not fall in love with a girl within seconds of seeing her or hearing her sing. "While young women are aware that tales like Pocahontas are fantasy,

they nevertheless may feel 'left out' thinking 'there is something wrong with *me*, not the fairy stories,'" (Dundes, 2001).

There are three types of heroines featured in Disney animated films:

The Princess, who is motherless and royalty by birth through her father or marriage to a prince; the Good Daughter, a young woman who out of loyalty to her good but naïve father, finds herself in a potentially threatening situation and must use all her personal resources to survive; and the Tough Gal, who is strong, brash, confident, has to overcome disadvantages, but 'leave(s) audiences in no doubt that far from needing (or even wanting) a man, these are women who can-and do-take care of themselves,'" (Breux, 2010).

There are too few princesses that categorize as "Tough Gal" and far too many negative role models. By portraying these so-called "role models" to young girls, Disney is telling them that if they don't fit this criterion, they are not going to live happily ever after. They must be skinny and beautiful to find a happy ending. In a study to determine if beauty played a role in children thinking that characters were good, the researchers found that, "physically attractive characters were more likely to achieve positive life outcomes at the film's end and were more likely to be romantically involved," (Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz 2010). It was also shown that the children would report that the more beautiful characters displayed the more positive traits, sometimes going against the story. It was also noted that there was a greater emphasis placed on females being attractive than perhaps the males. "Disney has often been reproached because

its distorted female images can have a potentially negative influence on young children,” (Lee, 2008). There are many pressures put upon young girls.

“Pressures to attain an unrealistic body image and beauty ideals to attract a mate are commonly blamed for young women’s depressed self-esteem,” (Dundes, 2001).

Disney princesses are shown as weak, submissive victims that cannot help themselves, always depending on the big, strong prince to save them. “While the negative representations of female gender in popular culture have been seen as a harmful influence on young children in several cultural critiques, young girls’ actual understanding of these representations has hardly been examined,” (Lee, 2008). It is difficult to understand the detrimental effects that Disney has on young girls in America; however, a study was conducted using a group of young, Korean immigrant girls to examine their ideas on gender in popular culture. “Given that media portrayals like those in the animated movies of Walt Disney often reinforce societal stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, and culture,” (Bazzini et al., 2010), it is imperative that society take a look at how Disney films affect young children’s ideas on these subjects. To do this, researchers chose Disney films due to their access and popularity. The study focuses specifically on Disney princesses’ marriages and relationships with the princes, an important part of almost every Disney princess film. It was amazing that even though the participants ranged from ages 5- to 8-years-old, they seemed to have a good idea of the unfairness of gender roles assigned by Disney.

These girls watched four Disney movies: *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, and *Aladdin*. Three of these movies contain Disney princesses. One of the main things that the young girls pointed out in these movies is that, “in order to get married, a princess tended to be forced to abandon her own decisions and desires, or her need for socio-familial rules in marriage,” (Lee, 2008). However, the participants concluded that the prince was able to marry whomever he wanted, without having to give up anything. This was evident in Ariel and Eric’s case. Ariel had to give up her family, friends, and home in order to marry Eric. Eric’s only problem seemed to be that he couldn’t remember who actually sang to him. Two of the young girls picked up on this fact stating that the reason for Eric wanting to marry Ariel was because of, “certain physical traits of the female characters, such as a pretty face and a beautiful voice,” (Lee, 2008). This was further evident in *Aladdin*. The participants concluded that, “Aladdin’s marriage was the result of Jasmine’s good looks,” (Lee, 2008). In fact, when describing Jasmine to the Genie, Aladdin mentions a lot of her physical features including her eyes, hair, smile, and the fact that she’s beautiful.

In an even more unsettling conversation between two of the girls, one of the girls was talking about how only men can be someone or do something. The other girl replied that that wasn’t fair. The first girl replied, “I know. But that’s the rule. Have you ever seen a president that’s a woman? There’s a chart of all of the previous American presidents in my class, but I see only men, men, men. A woman can’t be the president,” (Lee, 2008). While this belief might not

necessarily stem from Disney movies, by promoting weak and helpless princesses, Disney is telling our young girls that they can't be anything they want to be, especially not someone in a position of power. After this conversation, the two girls reflected on why a woman can't be president. One of them said, "If a woman was the president, she would have to do too much. They would have to have babies and raise them and have to cook, too. It's just too much for them," (Lee, 2008). This idea that girls will fail if they try to have both a career and family can cause many girls to believe that they aren't good enough so they do not try to have both. If young girls have the belief that they can only be a mother or have a job, not both, this can be detrimental to our future. "In this context, it is no wonder that girls transitioning into adulthood would suffer a loss of self-esteem as they anxiously wonder how they will ever achieve a balance that is deemed success," (Dundes, 2001). Even now, women still have a difficult time breaking into many higher up positions in companies and businesses. If society continues to put this idea in young girls' heads, there may be less women who try to be CEOs or presidents of companies, which could set back the feminist movement about 20 years.

The findings of this study were very interesting. According to this research, a child's different situations and experiences can affect them in different ways. While some young girls may not be affected by Disney movies, there are those that could be affected, as illustrated by the two young girls from the study. Should Disney continue creating movies that might affect children just because it might not affect every child? This study shows that these movies can, "have an impact

not only on how young children understand important social issues, such as those of gender, but also what they think about themselves and others,” (Lee, 2008). An important fact to remember is that almost every child has heard of Disney or seen a movie because Disney has such a widespread reach. “Disney’s influence [on children is] an almost inescapable part of growing up,” (Lester, 2010).

While there seems to be a big problem with Disney princesses, there is also a problem with males in Disney films. “On the issue of gender, the predominance of male characters in Disney animated films is equally non-reflective of modern society,” (Faherty, 2001). While there is a large amount of Disney females, there seems to be an even greater amount of males. While this is great for young boys, this leaves young girls with fewer choices of appropriate role models.

Another study that was conducted involved children and dramatic play. These children were avid Disney princess fans. They were given time to play and some of the results were astounding. “During princess play, girls focused on achieving beauty ideals...Girls as well as boys positioned male characters as powerful and female characters as weak,” (Wohlwend, 2009). The researchers noted that there was significant value placed on being beautiful and pretty and that the children would often stick to the storylines instead of coming up with new ideas. While people may think that watching Disney movies has no negative effects on children, this study proves that children watch these movies and have no idea how stereotyped females, in particular, are.

Although there have been some improvements to Disney heroines, especially more recently, there are still many problems to fix. According to Henke et al. (1996):

“In a world in which women struggle to expand their social and intellectual horizons, Disney films reify the image of the ‘perfect girl,’ while punishing inquisitive girls by labeling them disobedient and peculiar. Several of the heroines in these films suffer for challenging conventional expectations, and eventually all but one abandons her dreams for a definition of happiness within marriage. We also find it disquieting to witness adventurous and interesting role models like Ariel and Belle inevitably succumbing to the dominant heterosexual, patriarchal notion that, in the final analysis, satisfaction is defined not by self-knowledge, being, or accomplishments, but by a role prescribed through marriage” (p. 247).

It all started with a dream and a mouse. Now, Disney is a multi-billion dollar corporation that has taken over not only the United States but also the world. Disney movies have an affect on children whether it is seen right away or slowly over the years. Many children watch Disney movies and feel bad about themselves because they wish they could be more like Ariel or Belle. They want to be beautiful and know that one day, their own prince will come for them, if they are beautiful and thin enough. This is an unrealistic expectation to have for young girls. Instead of showing them princesses as being only one size, our society should be encouraging them that every body is beautiful and to love themselves

before worrying that a boy won't love them. Disney needs to focus on helping children instead of trying to get as much money and popularity as they can.

A great thing that Disney could do to help is create a new animated film with an overweight princess, or at least a princess that has some curves. By having a princess that looks more like them, this could greatly benefit children's self-esteem. This ideal body that Disney has created for princesses may be what everyone hopes to look like, but it is almost impossible, without developing an eating disorder or by having dangerous plastic surgery. Children need to have more role models that they can realistically strive to be like. Disney has the perfect opportunity to impact children in a positive manner.

Disney could even invent a new princess that has some form of disability. The amount of children that are being diagnosed with learning and physical disabilities increases every year. What are children supposed to think when every character that has some imperfection is shown as the bad guy? Even Quasimodo, the hero of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, doesn't win the girl at the end. This seems to show children that no matter what they do, they will never be good enough. Maybe by having a princess with a disability that is still a strong character, these children will be able to feel better about themselves.

Disney has an incredible opportunity to impact a new generation of children, however, there will not be a positive impact if Disney continues with their cookie cutter princesses. With the feminist movement and equal rights, women need to be shown as more active figures in their stories, not simply the victims.

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